

## Reconciling Community Development Needs and Great Apes Conservation: The Twin-Track Approach

*African Conservation Foundation*



Cross River gorilla, Limbe Wildlife Centre, Cameroon. Photo: Arend de Haas

Great apes throughout West and Central Africa - gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos - are being hunted for food and face the rapid loss of their habitat. Cameroon harbours two of the most threatened African great apes: the critically endangered Cross River gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla diehli*), the rarest of the gorilla sub-species with 250-300 individuals left in the wild; and the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee, also the most endangered chimpanzee subspecies in Africa with a population numbering less than 6,500. They are both keystone species in the montane forest ecosystems of the border region of Nigeria and Cameroon.

The main goal of the Western Cameroon Great Apes program is to protect and conserve the Cross River gorilla and Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzees across the Lebiale Highlands forest area in western Cameroon through research and development of participatory biodiversity management strategies.

The program is jointly implemented by the African Conservation Foundation (ACF) and the Environment and Rural Development Foundation through a partnership agreement under the auspices of the Ministry of Environment and Forestry.

With core financial support of the Conservation Division of the Forestry Bureau, COA, Taiwan and the Tusk Trust, systematic surveys were conducted in the Bechati-Mone Forest Corridor in order to establish and protect the ecological and genetic connectivity between great ape populations in Lebiale and Mone River Forest Reserve. The survey findings confirm that the Bechati-Mone Forest Landscape homes a fragile and important population of gorilla and chimpanzee. This area, which is drier and has a hilly topography, appears to be a last resort for the two great apes species. The level of hunting and agricultural activities is however increasing in this remote area and so is the pressure on the great ape populations and their habitat.

Highlights of the activities in the project year 2007-2008 include:

- Discovery of four new potential gorilla locations in the Bechati-Mone Forest Corridor.
- Confirmation of the presence of gorillas in the Lebialem forests through laboratory DNA tests.
- A short comparative study has been conducted on the nesting ecology of great apes in two disturbed habitats in the Lebialem highlands.
- Inclusion of the Lebialem Highlands project site into the Regional Action Plan for the Conservation of Cross River gorillas in Cameroon and Nigeria.
- Mapping of the apes' migratory route between Bechati and Mone Forest Reserve.
- Forest Management Committees established in nine out of ten villages in the Bechati-Fossimondi-Besali forest block: Fossimondi, Bechati, Folepi, Banti, Igumbo, Besali, Bangang, Nkong, and Bamumbu.
- Four community micro-finance structures for supporting sustainable community development actions in forest adjacent communities were initiated in Menji, Lewoh, M'mock and Lower Mundani areas.
- Socio-economic surveys were launched around the Bechati-Fossimondi-Besali forest block.
- Increased conservation awareness among the communities of Bechati-Fossimondi-Besali forest block through a sequence of community meetings and school visits.
- Canadian high realist artist Daniel Taylor has created the first-ever portrait painting of a Cross River gorilla.

The Upper Nkongho-Mbo forest block has not yet been surveyed due to lack of resources, while Mak-Betchou and UFA11002 have been partially surveyed in 2007. All of these blocks are key chimpanzee locations and gorilla presence may be confirmed after further research.

Identified threats to the survival of Cross River gorillas, chimpanzees and other primates in the Lebialem Highlands and the Bechati-Mone Forest Corridor are encroachment i.e. conversion of rainforests to farms and plantations, commercial logging, habitat fragmentation, great ape population fragmentation and most especially hunting and the illegal trade of bushmeat.

The results of the first and second phases of this program are being applied immediately as the situation is very critical. We are working with the Cameroon Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife on upgrading the conservation status of the forest areas to fully co-managed protected areas (three community wildlife reserves). This will contribute significantly to the protection of the Lebialem watershed which provides water to over 300,000 people.

The community-led and managed micro-financing mechanisms introduced in the previous project phase are being strengthened and the Community Funds created, capitalised to support the alternative livelihood schemes of the local hunters, trappers and farmers.

Since Cross River gorillas inhabit a region of high species richness combined with very high levels of endemism, measures that conserve the gorillas' habitat will at the same time protect many other endangered species that are restricted to this range.

We hope that our program results will encourage existing donors to renew their generous support and inspire other supporters to join in our efforts.

**Internet references**

ACF (African Conservation Foundation): <http://www.africanconservation.org>

Art for Africa: <http://www.art-for-africa.net>

Environment and Rural Development Foundation: <http://www.erudef.org/>

Arend de Haas ([arend@africanconservation.org](mailto:arend@africanconservation.org)) is co-founder and conservation director of the African Conservation Foundation (ACF). He is coordinating integrated conservation and development projects in Kenya, Tanzania and Cameroon.

Louis Nkembi ([lnkembi@yahoo.com](mailto:lnkembi@yahoo.com)) is director of the Environment and Rural Development Foundation and co-founder of African Conservation Foundation-Cameroon. He is a native of the Lebiallem Highlands.